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***CNA/Forum du Futur***

**Transatlantic Dialogue on Lebanon Conference**

**Paris, May 15-16, 2008**

***Rapporteurs : Mary Ellen Connell and Julia McQuaid***

**Introduction**

CNA and the French public policy NGO *Forum du Futur* convened a Transatlantic Dialogue on Lebanon in Paris, May 15-16, 2008. CNA was responsible for arranging for the participation of the U.S. experts while *Forum du Futur* recruited the French experts. CNA Vice President Rear Admiral (ret.) Michael McDevitt and *Forum du Futur* President Vice Admiral (ret.) Jean Betermier presided.

The Transatlantic Dialogue was designed to bring together American and French academics, current and former policy makers, to exchange views on how best to support the Lebanese government following the fall 2007 election of a new president to replace Emile Lahoud. That election was repeatedly delayed as Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's March 14 Movement (a collection of groups representing the Sunni, Christian, and Druze communities) and the opposition (primarily Hizbullah and the Maronite allies of Michel Aoun) maneuvered to secure their political objectives.

**May 2008 Crisis**

**Background:**

Shortly before our meeting began in May, the Siniora government issued two orders designed to reduce the power of Hizbullah: to transfer Brigadier General Wafiq Choucair, the security chief at the Beirut airport and a Hizbullah ally, and to begin dismantling Hizbullah's closed telecommunications system. Hizbullah reacted quickly to these perceived threats by closing major roads in Beirut and barricading neighborhoods. By May 9, Hizbullah and Amal forces, along with their allies in the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP), had control of most of West Beirut, including the buildings and broadcasting station of Sa'ad Hariri's Future Movement. They also forced the closure of the Beirut airport. Two of our Dialogue participants were able to leave Lebanon in order to take part in the conference but two others were unable to depart and reported to our gathering via an amplified cell phone; which worked remarkably well.

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## Analysis:

Dialogue participants who had recently left Beirut or were still there speculated on why the Siniora government decided to act against Hizbullah as it did. They noted that Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (Druze), was allegedly harassed by the security forces at the airport and that on May 3 Jumblatt held a press conference calling for the firing of General Choucair. It was assumed in circles in Lebanon and in France that the Siniora government was proceeding with the encouragement of outside actors, including the United States and Israel. Other people in Lebanon thought that this might be part of a grand strategy to remove Hizbullah as a factor in Lebanon; they reasoned that with this foreign backing, the government felt safe taking these measures to confront Hizbullah. A French expert observed that the Siniora government seemed reluctant to make the decisions regarding General Choucair and the Hizbullah communications system – the Cabinet met for many hours – but ultimately they did issue orders and “we think the Saudis were pushing Siniora to get tough on Hizbullah.”

A long-time analyst of Hizbullah noted that the recent crisis demonstrated that there is real unity within the opposition and that Shia voices in Lebanon are in agreement: “The Opposition represents a solidification of the Shia community. Hizbullah and Amal are more or less united. And it is a relatively recent phenomenon that the Shia are united. It’s an artifact of the security narrative of the Shia – the almost unanimous view is that they are a community at risk.” Whereas just a few years ago Hizbullah and Amal fought against each other, now they are working closely together. He added that, in the eyes of Lebanese Shia, Hizbullah is seen as not corrupt and as benefiting the community. The Amal is viewed as a gigantic corruption network, comprised of thugs and tough guys. Hizbullah, a much more disciplined force, receives support from many Lebanese, Shia and non-Shia, as the resistance to Israel and the “Western project” or the “American project.”

Hizbullah’s primary targets in Beirut during the May crisis were the buildings of the Future Movement. Throughout the operation, the opposition focused on keeping casualties to a minimum. Sa’ad Hariri’s Al-Mustaqbal television station was taken off the air, and employees fled. At the height of the Hizbullah offensive, neighborhoods were blocked off from one another, although individuals could move fairly freely within neighborhoods. The Future Movement buildings were burned, allegedly by members of the SSNP.

As the operation continued, the Hizbullah forces did not hold onto the buildings and neighborhoods they took, but rather handed them over to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The organization appeared to be sending the signal that, despite Hizbullah’s military predominance, they still respected Lebanon’s national institutions. All dialogue participants agreed that the operation was a clear success for the opposition and that Siniora government and the March 14 Movement forces had been swiftly and decisively defeated.

It was clear that Hizbullah was superbly organized in Beirut. A U.S. analyst explained that the organization relies upon a small core group of fulltime fighters countrywide (approximately 450 to 500 people in the 1990s, today perhaps 800), and depends on an extensive reserve system. During the offensive, the neighborhood shopkeepers and falafel vendors in Beirut suddenly turned into armed militiamen. Hizbullah may have learned its style from the Palestinian model wherein instead of having a larger force, there is a permanent cadre but also an extensive reserve system of trained forces, or an “accordion force.”



A participant still in Beirut observed that the Hizbullah offensive “appeared to be based on both the Israeli mobilization system and the Israeli style of preemptive use of force.” A member of Hizbullah, when asked whether they were advised by Iran, laughed and replied that they had learned from observing the best army in the Middle East: the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Dialogue participants agreed that Hizbullah had these plans on the shelf and simply decided to implement them.

The May events were described as Hizbullah’s version of “shock and awe.” Hizbullah forces acted with unusual speed. They knew exactly where to go, down to specific streets and house numbers. As a result, they quickly rolled up and disarmed key members of the Future Movement leadership and targeted members of “Security Plus,” a private security company which allegedly serves as the Future Movement’s militia (Sunni, pro-government). They also focused on cutting off the communication and propaganda of the Future Movement, Al-Mustaqbal television. To carry out the action in Beirut, Hizbullah did not appear to have to redeploy forces facing Israel in the south. These recent events made it clear that Hizbullah has two separate force packages: an anti-Israel force and a constabulary force.

All participants agreed that the May action was the worst inter-community violence Lebanon had seen since the end of the civil war. Since 2006, Hizbullah has been living in a state of extreme paranoia. They are truly convinced that they are under attack; they believe they are living in a web of plots emanating from Washington, DC, and Tel Aviv, naturally, but also now involving Riyadh, Amman, and Cairo. (Hizbullah is convinced that Siniora represents U.S. interests in Lebanon and that Jumblatt’s moves in May proved it). Another expert observed: “Hizbullah has a palpable feeling of being at great risk. There are signals of a robust campaign against it. They think that steps could not be taken without significant collaboration with the U.S.”

The assassination of Imad Mugniyah, a senior member of the organization, in Damascus was a major contribution to Hizbullah’s perception of insecurity and led to the organization’s drastic measures in response to the government’s orders. Prior to the assassination, which took place in February 2008, Hizbullah thought of Syria as their “security space.” Mugniyah’s assassination was a major turning point, that assassins (unknown, but suspected to be Israel) could get Mugniyah in Damascus was a shock. Hizbullah now wonders whether the Syrians deliberately let down their guard. A dialogue participant speculated that the implications of the Mugniyah assassination caused the organization to begin thinking about pre-emptive actions, and in general opened their thinking about the range of possible options in Lebanon.

A French academic asserted that at the end of the Lahoud mandate in the fall of 2007, the French negotiated a below-the-table agreement with the Lebanese political parties which included an understanding that the Siniora government would stick to minimal political action until a president was agreed on, and put in place. The Siniora government’s two decisions signaled to Hizbullah that Siniora was taking the prerogatives of a government (presumably with the encouragement of international supporters). As a result, Hizbullah wanted to act strongly, decisively, and violently, to demonstrate clearly that they rejected the idea of a power-grab on the part of the Siniora government during this interim period.

Was Hizbullah attempting a coup d’etat in Lebanon – perhaps with direct backing from Iran, and most likely Syria? Many pro-government elements in Lebanon agreed with this claim, and the March 14



Movement depicted it as an Iranian coup d'état on the shores of the Mediterranean but Hizbullah did not achieve a coup d'état – they stopped short of it. The organization's next action was still unknown; would Hizbullah go north and try to capture the Chouf, for example? Some speculated that at one point the group may have intended to take over Beirut but that the Saudis put pressure on Tehran to prevent this from happening.

A U.S. analyst said that in his view, Hizbullah's goal was not to topple the government, but rather to prevent the consolidation of a U.S./French-backed government in Beirut. For example, he explained, Hizbullah was quite deliberate about not attacking official government facilities or any legitimate institutions of the state during the outbreak. Once they had gone far enough to send a very strong signal that they would not be marginalized or disarmed, they stopped. A participant speaking to U.S. from Beirut described the feeling on the street as believing that Hizbullah had "used force in a measured way" and was just making "fireworks."

General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement forces reportedly did not participate in the violence; but did support the Opposition throughout the May events. Dialogue participants agreed that the relationship between Hizbullah and Christian Maronite leader Michel Aoun, remains key to current politics in Lebanon. Aoun, who is in his seventies, spent much of his life fighting the Syrian domination of Lebanon. He astonished many observers when in 2006, less than a year after he returned to Lebanon after 14 years of exile in France, he joined hands with Hizbullah. Aoun insists that ties he has forged to Hizbullah will ward off Syria rather than allow it to return to Lebanon. A French academic stated that he believes Aoun is now at risk. He predicted that Christian strongman Dr. Samir Geagea might take this opportunity to "wipe Aoun off the map." Aoun remains popular. His Free Patriotic Movement picked up the seat of Phalangist scion Pierre Gemayel who was assassinated in Beirut in November 2006. But Michel Aoun is aging and his middle class supporters are fleeing Lebanon--part of the brain drain of Christians. Another analyst offered that to the extent that Michel Aoun is marginalized within the Christian community, he is marginalized in Lebanese politics. The French academic depicted Geagea as the hard man of Lebanese politics. He spent more than a decade in prison for his activities during the 1975-1990 civil war and was only released in 2005. Geagea's Lebanese Forces are poor, not well-educated, and tough tempered by his experiences and demonstrably ruthless, Geagea could seek to assume leadership of the Christian community in Lebanon.

### **The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)**

Throughout the political crisis, outside Lebanon watchers have paid particular attention to the behavior of the LAF as the one potentially neutral party in the increasingly divided country. Historically, the LAF as an institution has been highly respected in Lebanese society and has had a history of protecting the population of Beirut. From the beginning of the political crisis, the army took an oath to intervene only to keep peace. In May 2008, the LAF were self-consciously neutral, to the dismay of the Siniora government. The ostensible rationale for this posture was the LAF's assertion that they are Lebanon's only truly "national" organization and that had they taken sides it would have ruined the public's perception of the LAF.

General Michel Suleiman who was then LAF commander and is now President, warned that if the army became involved in the conflict, it would have put unity of the institution, perhaps the unity of country itself at risk. During the conflict, there was anger in West Beirut at Suleiman's decision.



Posters supporting Suleiman had previously hung in parts of Beirut but were ripped down after this decision.

Prior to the May 2008 conflict, voices within Lebanon and outside the country had been criticizing the LAF, presumably for having pro-Hizbullah leanings, among other things. Members of the March 14 Movement were charging the LAF of coordinating with Hizbullah. Other voices within Lebanon echoed this criticism, pointing to the LAF's general performance, its reluctance to exert its authority, and its willingness to talk to Hizbullah. The LAF has adopted an attitude of cooperation with Hizbullah since the Israeli withdrawal and the prevailing attitude within the LAF is that Hizbullah is a national resistance movement. The LAF is not predominately Shi'ite. It has a plurality of Sunnis—about 40 to 45 percent. They typically come from the northern part of the country, where the economy is weak and there are few opportunities. Joining the army provides a way for this group to have a career -- typically 20 years or longer. The Shia is the second largest group in the LAF. The makeup of the LAF is changing: Sunni and Christian officers are resigning from LAF in greater numbers.

A French participant urged CNA-*Forum du Futur* Dialogue participants to focus on the personal history of Michel Suleiman. In the first part of his career, he was trained in France and the U.S. At the end of the Lebanese civil war, he was a high-ranking officer with Michel Aoun's troops. When Syria started running things in Lebanon, Suleiman was put in "cold storage." Suleiman then decided to go for further military training in Syria. One member of his training class was Bashar al-Assad who had been brought back to Syria to become the heir apparent after the death of his older brother, Basil al-Assad.

Dialogue participants agreed that the LAF is stretched thin and over-committed. American assistance has been focusing on support to the LAF, which an American analyst described as a positive development so long as that is not all we do. He warned that a strategy that aims to create a powerful LAF to obtain our goals in Lebanon would be misguided. A former high-ranking French officer agreed, noting that France provides a level of assistance to the LAF and other security forces which France believes the LAF is capable of absorbing: a patrol boat, repair for two landing ships, repair and parts for the army's helicopters, and so forth. He pointed out that on the LAF website, Israel is identified as the enemy and that this is a problem in France and in the EU. "The Lebanese Army," he observed, "needs to be strong, but many in Lebanon don't want it to be strong. We in the West have to proceed pragmatically, progressively."

### **On the Brink?**

The general mood of participants regarding the situation in Lebanon was sober. Most did not think it would end without significant bloodshed; several were convinced that the country was already on an irreversible path to civil war.

### ***Ethnic and sectarian tensions were soaring***

At the time of the Transatlantic Dialogue in May, some were convinced that internal tensions in Lebanon were acute and thought that the conflict could easily slip into an all-out civil war, akin to the 1975-1990 war. One predicted that "cantonization" of Lebanon might result. Another, speaking by telephone, observed that there was a tremendous feeling of anger in West Beirut, a Sunni stronghold. There is a feeling of rage and frustration at Sa'ad Hariri for not providing his Sunni following with



the weapons to fight. In addition, anger was directed at Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt for not supporting them, as well as at the Americans and the Europeans for not coming to the rescue of the March 14 Movement. The violence during and in the wake of the May events was not solely between Sunni and Shia groups – it extended into fighting between other ethnic and ideological factions. For example, the SSNP (which has a large Christian make-up) reportedly also took part in the attack on Sa’adHariri’s al-M taqbal media operation.

### ***Fighting spread quickly outside of Beirut***

Several participants noted that the speed with which the fighting spread outside of Beirut sets this conflict aside from past flare-ups in Lebanon. In Tripoli, the country’s second largest city and a Sunni stronghold, pro-Hariri and anti-Hariri militias reportedly took up arms. Sunni pro-government forces also fought Alawites (a sect of Shi’ite Islam that the Syrian Assad family follows and that is also loyal to Hizbullah). Hizbullah also launched attacks in the Chouf. They wanted to control the coastal road, which is the weakest part of Jumblatt’s security apparatus. But in the higher Chouf, Hizbullah suffered serious losses. They lost at least 10 in the Barouk (Cedar Forest). Significantly, Hizbullah does not have much power north of Beirut, so they rely on SSNP and Salafists.

### ***Would the extremists be activated?***

A participant explained that opposition media had been reflecting concern over the potential rise of a Sunni Takfiri (religiously extreme) trend, which would target the Shia community and members of the SSNP. Reports in *al-Saffir* and *al-Akhbar* (opposition-leaning publications) reflected this sentiment. Additionally, there were reports that Salafists had been involved in capturing and mutilating SSNP members—some footage was posted on the Internet. Several speakers were concerned that the defeat of Sa’adHariri could embolden the “jihadists,” creating a greater space for them to operate in within the Sunni community. There was also speculation that Hariri has a potential tool in the jihadists. Most agreed however, that Hariri had not yet made the choice to “ride the dragon.”

### ***Al-Qaeda in Lebanon***

A former U.S. official observed that the threat of Al-Qaeda in Lebanon is real; over the past several months Al-Qaeda has seen the opportunity to “fish in troubled waters” in Lebanon. Another speaker agreed, describing Lebanon as the perfect storm for Al-Qaeda. First, it is a weak state. We know from other experiences that Al-Qaeda puts down roots in places where there is little to no central control. Second, there is a Sunni community under threat. Finally, there is a new crusader army to fight in the form of UNIFIL. It is possible that Al-Qaeda views Lebanon as a place to regroup. Another participant explained that there are pro-Al-Qaeda Sunni groups in Lebanon, who will actively fight for the Sunnis. Fatah el-Islam, for example, came out during the incursion to say they will take up arms on behalf of the Sunnis. Other participants disagreed with this assessment, arguing that should Al-Qaeda set up shop in Lebanon, it would get bogged down in Lebanese local politics and Syrian politics – something the group is not interested in doing.

### **The Role of Outside Powers in Lebanon**

From its inception, outside powers have had influence over events in Lebanon. As a French expert put it, the leading politicians in Lebanon do not make major decisions about the country without consider-



ing outside players and influences. Some Transatlantic Dialogue participants viewed the May 2008 conflict as a battleground for a broader conflict between the U.S., Israel, France, other Western powers, and a collection of Arab states pitted against Syria and Iran. Other participants disagreed, however, arguing that the conflict was sparked by internal Lebanese issues having to do with demographic shifts and negotiating an equitable power-sharing agreement among the various groups and leaders.

#### **Iran:**

According to a prominent French expert on Iran, Iran is a weak state. It has the capacity to cause disturbances in the region, but beyond that its capacity is limited. Today, Iran exports hydrocarbons, carpets, and pistachios (the latter two are the same products Iran exported in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he noted). For Iran, nuclear development is a deterrence policy. To understand Iran's interests in Lebanon, it is essential to view Iranian policy as having three primary overarching objectives. First, it has a national ambition to be respected on the world stage. Second, it wants to be recognized as an actor in the Islamic world on par with the Saudis and the Egyptians. Third, it wants to have an influential role within the global economy in such areas as science, technology, and finance. Iran sees itself as a future financial center equal to Dubai, for example.

There are threads of nationalism, Islamic solidarity, and international ambitions in all of Iranian's foreign policy decisions. The one place where these threads come together successfully is Iran's support to Hizbullah in Southern Lebanon. Today in Lebanon, the Iranians are not directing the game but they are benefiting from their long-term investments in Hizbullah. By helping Hizbullah, Iran is able to directly challenge U.S. interests. However, as an American participant suggested, today Hizbullah may not be as interested in Iran as Iran is interested in it.

The French expert raised the possibility that there is now an opportunity in Iran as the next generation of leadership sorts itself out. The rising leaders, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard or Pasdaran, are now in their 50's. A number of them have spent several years in Lebanon as advisors to Hizbullah. They will continue to assert a tough policy on Lebanon but that their worldview may be different from that of their colleagues who have had a less "international" experience.

Another French analyst noted that as part of a region-wide struggle for leadership in the Islamic world, the Iranians are pushing the Shia community throughout the Middle East to be more assertive, particularly in Dubai, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. His American counterpart observed that "for the time being the dominant trend in the Levant appears to be the *Pax Iranicus* the centerpiece of which is the potential Iranian nuclear weapon." The French are often approached by the Iranians and the Saudis as well. The Saudis pitch the idea that France is the protector of the Christians, Iran of the Shi'ites, and, the Saudis of the Sunnis—why not make a deal on Lebanon?

#### **Saudi Arabia:**

The Saudis are intensely frustrated with the current situation in the Middle East and blame much of it on the U.S. and the war on terror (which the Saudis view as a complete failure). They have a deep distrust of the U.S. and believe that the Americans have also failed in Iraq (The French analyst explained that the Saudis confide in the French—or perhaps to just him—about their frustrations with the Americans). He went on to explain that the Saudis primary concern today is Iran, which they perceive as having stolen the show from them as the "defender" of the Muslims in the region. The Saudis most



effectively exercise power in Lebanon through the March 14 Movement. They have also been pouring money and support into the Sunni community more broadly to offset the Shia influence. For now, the Saudis are focused on keeping Iran from getting any more additional cards to play in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia wants to implement a policy of containment against Iran while waiting for a signal from the U.S. The Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal was uncharacteristically explicit in his comments on the May 2008 events, a clear indication that Saudi anxiety is very strong.

All participants agreed that the relationship between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which has been an important relationship in terms of keeping the peace in Lebanon, has deteriorated. In the days of the Ta'if accord, there was a strong partnership that made the agreement work; while it was conceived of in Saudi, it was implemented through Damascus. A French participant asserted that "the Ta'if agreement was brokered in Saudi Arabia for the benefit of the Sunnis. Syria is perceived to be a traitor by the Saudis. However, Saudi policy was not always anti-Syria." Despite its support of Iran during the war, Hafez al-Assad maintained relations with the Saudi royal family.

### **Syria:**

An American expert on Syria offered the view from Damascus. For the past several years, the Syrians have held deep grievances, believing they have been "disrespected" by the international community. The Syrians view the world as a lawless jungle; in Iraq the strong (i.e., the Americans) have taken the law into their own hands. Syria, on the other hand, perceives a double standard: Israel is able to get away with developing a nuclear force; Syria is not. From the Syrian viewpoint, the world is a Machiavellian one, where only powerful states are respected.

The Syrians' pervasive sense of insecurity stems in part from the fact that their borders are frequently violated. Regime survival is the core goal in Damascus. It must remain strong, and do whatever is necessary to get financial support (from outside patrons, such as Iran) in order to buy off segments of society. Another analyst pointed out that all is not well domestically in Syria and that Syria has become a crony capitalist state similar to Saudi Arabia. According to him, the Lebanese banking sector is crucial to the Syrian economy, Syrian oil reserves are declining, and inflation is rising. The Syrian economy is becoming "dollarized", because the Iraq refugees have brought dollars into the country. The 1.5 million Iraq refugees are a burden on the economy, and they depress wages.

Syria's foreign primary foreign policy objective is to obtain the return of the Golan Heights with honor (which would mean in a way that the Arabs don't perceive Syria as having sold out). Two American participants agreed there was an opportunity to settle the issue and transform Syrian policy in at the Israel/Syria negotiations in Shepherdstown, WV in 2000 but that the moment slipped away. There may have been another chance when Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2001. He wanted to align Syria with Europe and modernize the Syrian economy. The failure of the Peace Process, however, deflected Syria from that path.

The biggest deterrent to economic and political progress has been Syria's poor relations with the U.S. over its' invasion of Iraq. This has locked Syria into opposition with the U.S. and West. Many Arab states stayed quiet over Iraq. However, according to one speaker, Syria's protests gave, the Neo-Cons an opportunity to paint Syria as dangerous to the U.S. Had Syria worked with the U.S. over Iraq, it could have benefited as it did during Desert Storm. In the post-Iraq invasion environment, U.S. diplomacy has trapped Syria into a frozen policy by presenting Syria with non-negotiable demands: es-



essentially “cooperate with the U.S. invasion of Iraq or else...” Syria feared losing its credibility as an Arab leader and thus its claim to receiving economic resources from other states, especially from Iran.

### ***The Assads***

President Bashar al-Assad is not as strong as his father was. Syria is a small, weak state that has had to live in a world of more powerful states; Hafez had years of experience doing this and was highly politically adept. He was very cautious, always seeking defensive alliances. He sought to preserve a balance of power—patience is a virtue if your vital interests are at stake. He knew how to negotiate, while keeping cards in his hand. He also engaged in asymmetric warfare, he used proxies, and he set up deterrents. Hafez was a master of executing this intricate balancing act.

Bashar has not pursued the same tactics as his father. One Dialogue participant likened him to Michael Corleone in the *Godfather*: “He wanted to make the family business legitimate, but the family business ultimately changed him; he didn’t change the business.” Bashar has made some mistakes his father would not have made. It was very unwise for Syria to have alienated Saudi Arabia. Hafez managed to maintain an important strategic relationship with the Saudis. What Bashar failed to grasp is that the Saudis do not want regime change in Syria—neither do the Israelis. But now the U.S. and France are united in their opposition to Syria. Bashar has backed himself into a corner because he now has to stick with the Iran-Syria alliance, whether he likes it or not.

### ***Interests in Lebanon***

Lebanon is an important strategic card for Syria, and Syria has permanent interests in that country: (1) Lebanon is its natural sphere of influence (under the Ottomans it was Syrian territory); (2) Syria needs Lebanon as a friendly buffer zone; (3) The regime wants to prevent the Syrian opposition from using Lebanon as a launching pad against them; (4) Syria wants to limit Israeli influence in Lebanon; and (5) Syria needs Lebanon’s economic resources.

Today the Syrians must deal with the fact that the U.S. and France have set out to deprive them of their Lebanon card. A French analyst with long experience in the region pointed out that the Syrians are convinced that Lebanon will be under the influence of either the Syrians or the Saudis and naturally, the Syrians want to ensure their dominance. Lebanon is Syria’s near abroad. Syrians see the Hizbullah as being absolutely essential to their interests in Lebanon. They want to maintain the tight alliance they have with Iran. With regard to the current crisis, Syria wants to ensure that Lebanon’s consensus political system is preserved and that the Hizbullah has a veto on government decisions. The inclusion of Hizbullah in the Lebanese government deprives Syria of its role as arbiter—to Syria’s political detriment.

### ***Relations with Turkey***

Relations between Syria and Turkey are strong. A common concern over the Kurdish threat unites the two states. In addition, Bashar and his wife are particularly welcome in Turkey because they are overtly secular (unlike the AK Party leaders’ wives, Bashar’s wife Asma does not veil). Many Turks respect Damascus and the fact that its leadership is genuine and unwavering in terms of its position in the world, while their own identity is in flux. A Turkey/Syria/Iran axis may offer opportunities for all



three countries. They share interests in the oil transport routes and can also potentially coordinate efforts against Kurdish nationalists within their populations.

#### **Israel:**

An American expert explained that Lebanon has always been a source of difficulty for Israel. Each time the Israelis try to shape the Lebanese political environment, the outcome is bad for both countries. For different reasons and at different moments over the past several decades, both Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak decided that Lebanon was a quagmire. Israel has always had a weak capacity to analyze things on the ground in Lebanon and this has caused major obstacles for the Israelis.

Another speaker suggested that today (and for the past several years), the Israelis' primary concern is Hizbullah's weapons – specifically the missiles. Since the end of the 2006 war, Hizbullah has re-armed. It is now believed to have 27,000 missiles, some capable of reaching Tel Aviv, others with a 500-mile range and thousands with 40 mile range.

Throughout the May 2008 conflict, the Israeli media took an alarmist perspective, describing Lebanon as a future "Hizbullahland." But that this may not be the genuine view of the Israelis. Rather, the Israelis are more or less pleased with the current mess because it means that Hizbullah has now gotten itself mired in the internal morass of Lebanese domestic conflict and therefore doesn't have the luxury of exclusively focusing on Israel. The expert speculated that Israel might be tempted to meddle in Lebanon, perhaps with Christian allies (possibly Samir Gaegae). Israel continues its operations against the Hizbullah and most participants agreed Israel played a role in the Mugniyah assassination. He declined to say whether he thought that Israel killed Mugniyah, but noted the Israelis did believe Mugniyah to be the nodal point between Hizbullah and the *Pasdaran*.

He also expressed the view that if Israel agrees to do a deal with Syria, the U.S. administration which takes office in January 2009 would not be opposed. The question is, what would Syria do to defang Hizbullah and Hamas? A French academic doubted that Syria could deliver Hizbullah. In his view the only viable option for the West is dual engagement with Syria and Iran—Syria wants a grand bargain. Another French participant interjected that the Turks could play an effective role.

The North Korea/Syria nuclear issue: The revelation of the North Korea/Syria nuclear effort was a major shock to Israel and certainly led to a set back in progress towards a negotiated settlement on the Golan Heights. One of the participants at the conference declared himself perplexed. He observed that it is extremely costly to build a nuclear weapon and that Syria doesn't have the money. "They must have known that if they tried to do it, they would be found out." A French participant did not find the nuclear story credible. He wondered whether this was a U.S. attempt to block negotiations between Syria and Israel. "Why did the Israelis give the photos to the U.S.?" Yet another participant underlined the negative element to the previous comment: The Iranian financial subsidies are very important for Syria. Would the Syrians continue to be paid if there was a Syria/Israel deal? Many people have a reason to try to stop Syria/Israel negotiations.

In the meantime, the Israelis are preparing for the next war. Israel has just completed an 18-month-long "lessons learned" assessment of the 2006 war, a project led by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. Two potential sparks that could ignite another major fight involving Israel and its neighbors: The

first would be an Israeli assassination attempt on Nasrallah, and a violent Israeli response to the Iranian problem. If Israel were to strike Iran, Hizbullah would resume its attacks on Israel.

### **Transatlantic Cooperation on Lebanon**

An American official led the discussion of transatlantic cooperation on Lebanon. He summarized the presentations just made and asked several questions:

- Are we in the best-case scenario (i.e., back at status quo ante) or has the situation evolved irrevocably?
- How do we view Hizbullah after the events of the past week? Are we likely to see a wounded, humiliated Sunni community about to become the armed resistance to the armed resistance?
- What does this mean for transatlantic relations?

He went on to list some potential avenues of action:

- Parallel engagement via bi-lateral efforts, U.S./Lebanon, France/Lebanon, and allowing other efforts to go forward
- More coordinated U.S./EU effort (to be spelled out explicitly)
- Forge an ad hoc coalition of the willing, U.S., France, regional players (Arab states but not including Iran or Syria)
- NATO and/or EU given lead role in engagement with NATO training for the LAF and an expanded ESDP effort
- UN led umbrella group that would provide legitimacy

He then posed a series of questions and observations:

- What are the drivers? What are the attitudes of local actors? What about the discrediting of Western engagement, as we have heard about from speakers in Beirut
- You can't ignore regional players. You need a permissive environment for greater international involvement. What kind of Lebanon do we want? What sort of division of labor among the friends of Lebanon?
- How much freedom of action do local actors have from such regional actors as Syria and Iran? What is the credibility of the LAF? Is it still seen as a legitimate, national force?
- How do the various groups within Lebanon perceive the international community?
- Do we anticipate the success of the Middle East Peace Process? We all agree that success would profoundly impact the situation in Lebanon.
- Russia, we see as a wild card.
- Could there be a split between Iran and Syria, particularly as the negotiations between Syria and Israel move forward? What might we expect from a Syria that is suddenly cut off from Iranian financial support?
- We also agree that what happens in Iraq will impact Syria. Will the 1.5 million Iraqi refugees return to Iraq?
- What can transatlantic cooperation do to impact this crisis?



There has been a history of strong bilateral cooperation between France and the U.S. on Lebanon, which was strengthened after the assassination of Hariri. With the failure of the Lebanese to elect a president, we have been in a political vacuum without many levers. The U.S. and France are working closely together, coordinating across time zones, keeping each other informed. Our countries' views on Lebanon are not shared across the EU. Even the other key Mediterranean countries don't agree on how to deal with Syria. A coalition of the willing, "Friends of Lebanon," would consist of the EU, France, U.S., the Arab League, and certain Arab countries. This collaboration might produce a more durable situation in Lebanon. In the UN Security Council there is "resolution fatigue" with regard to Lebanon. Also in the UN, Russia must be heard.

Dialogue participants agreed that the idea of going back to the status quo ante is fanciful. "Everyone knows that Hizbullah has bared its teeth and gotten away with it." In three instances now, the West and its friends have been defeated by the alliance of Hizbullah-Iran-Syria. First there was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which the U.S. thought would be a cakewalk, then came the Hamas election victory in Gaza, and now we have the Hizbullah "coup" in Lebanon. Hizbullah's principal goals have been achieved in Beirut: a Suleiman presidency, a national unity government with Hizbullah and Michel Aoun in the government and, a veto over government initiatives."

A participant strongly urged a more proactive engagement with Syria and Iran and a new strategy which buttresses the position of our friends in Lebanon and Palestine. We need to revitalize the Arab/Israeli peace process. Another asked, "What are the levers now available to France and the U.S.? Is there anything which could help except more engagement?" We should embrace the Israeli/Syria dialogue. "

Others in the group warned that the elements are present in Lebanon for another civil war. There is an imbalance of power and demography. The Shia, which are in the plurality, have the least power. Another ingredient is when the national pact is violated, when the rule of consensus is violated. This occurred when the March 14 Movement, which had a temporary majority, took the actions it did against Hizbullah. Outside forces could also make Lebanon a test of strength. Richard Murphy, President Reagan's Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs once famously advised the Lebanese to settle their problems amongst themselves. That is still wise advice. It would be more effective for France and the U.S. to work toward a Saudi/Syria rapprochement. A French participant reminded the group that engaging the Turks would be useful.

Some expressed disappointment that our discussion didn't focus enough on a vision for Lebanon. What do we want? The Shia want a larger share of power. With Hizbullah's performance in the past days, we see that this has become inevitable. Could we see a paralysis of the system? That is a reality at present. The outcome of Doha opens up options to discuss Hizbullah's role and the possibility of its integration into the LAF. We should be looking at how to optimize U.S. and Western interests and bring about the neutralization of Lebanon in a regional context.

CNA Vice President Michael McDevitt brought the session to a close saying: "Last year, at the conclusion of the CNA/*Forum du Futur* dialogue, I said that Syria is the key to unlocking these issues and that remains my judgment. I am pessimistic about priorities: In the U.S., the focus of the next administration will be on Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, the rise of China, and the Middle East Peace Process. Unless Lebanon is folded into the top five, it won't get top level attention."



## **Key Take-Aways From the Dialogue**

- There was consensus among French and U.S. participants about the cause of the conflict and its implications for the future of Lebanon. The French are particularly concerned with the impact of the Doha Agreement on proportionality and what this will mean for the Maronites.
- By the end of the May conflict, Hizbullah had achieved its principal goals: a Suleiman presidency; a national-unity government including representatives of Hizbullah and Michel Aoun; and a veto over government initiatives. There is no possible return to a *status quo ante*.
- There has been a pattern of the U.S. and its allies being “defeated” by a Hizbullah-Iran-Syria alliance. First there was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, which the U.S. thought would be a cakewalk. Then there was the Hamas election victory in Gaza. Finally, this most recent conflict, which many view as an undisputed Hizbullah victory. In our efforts to prevent these outcomes, we look like the Keystone Cops. It has been bad for U.S. and French prestige.
- Trust between the West and the March 14 Movement has eroded. The March 14 Movement felt betrayed by their allies in the West. They activated their lobby in Washington and appealed to the embassies in Beirut to intervene, but with no success.
- It is not clear who will emerge as the leader of the Sunni community, with Saad Hariri having been defeated so soundly. Although Hariri seems to have access to unlimited cash flow to support his cause, will Sunni voters will be willing to elect Hariri’s parliamentary list or will they turn to someone else? Will Sunni hardliners in Lebanon and beyond hold back from using the Salafists and al-Qaeda?
- Is Maronite leader and Hizbullah ally Michel Aoun at the pinnacle of his power or on the verge of being brushed aside? We should keep an eye on Samir Geagea.
- The U.S. and France need to be realistic about their ability to impact events in Lebanon. We should embrace the Israel/Syria dialogue and work toward a Saudi/Syria rapprochement. The Turks are already active as a mediator between Israel and Syria. Qatar continues to play a useful role.
- Should negotiations fail, the Israelis and Hizbullah are already preparing for another major conflict. The Hizbullah arsenal has been replenished. The Israelis might potentially build up the northern front against Hizbullah (with some combination of Christian, Druze, and Sunni forces).

### **Comment:**

Since Doha the French have been taking bold steps with regard to Lebanon. President Sarkozy and several members of his cabinet visited Beirut on June 7. Nicholas Sarkozy was the first Western head of state to meet with newly-elected President Michel Suleiman. By inviting Bashar al-Assad to attend the EU-Mediterranean Summit in Paris and to observe the Bastille Day parade in the company of France’s warmest friends, President Sarkozy staged a diplomatic come-back for the Syrian president. President Sarkozy presided over a meeting of Bashar al-Assad, Michel Suleiman and the Emir of Qatar on the margins of the Mediterranean Summit in Paris, a session which resulted in a public announcement that Lebanon and Syria will resume diplomatic relations. President Sarkozy is expected to visit Syria on September 7.